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HOW SHOULD THE US ADAPT ITS MILITARY DOCTRINE TO BE ABLE TO FIGHT A
PEER COMPETITOR?

by

Paul Kendall, Wing Commander, UK Royal Air Force

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Advisor: Dr John Schuessler

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Biography

Wing Commander Paul Kendall is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He joined the Royal Air Force in 1986 through a University Cadetship, reading Physics at Imperial College in London. He trained as a rotary-wing navigator and has flown the Puma and Merlin helicopters in battlefield support, special operations and personnel recovery roles, seeing operational service in Northern Ireland, Bosnia and Iraq. He completed the Advanced Command and Staff Course at the UK Joint Services Command and Staff College (JSCSC) in 2006, gaining a Master's Degree in Defence Studies from King's College London. His staff tours include helicopter airworthiness, military faculty at the JSCSC, and head of strategy division in the UK Joint Force Air Component Headquarters, during which time he served on tours in Afghanistan, air operations in Libya and providing air security for the London Olympics. In his last appointment he served as an exchange officer in the Pentagon, as a branch chief for U.S. Air Force A5/8.

Abstract

American military thought, the so-called American Way of War, is predicated around winning decisive victories over all opponents. This may not be possible in the future. In the long term, unipolarity is likely to give way to multipolarity and so America may face challenges from other great powers. Even if multipolarity endures, there is an increasing chance of a conflict with a much more capable enemy than the United States is accustomed to facing, including nuclear-armed states. Aiming for an overwhelming victory will be inappropriate and possibly dangerous. A more flexible mindset will be needed, and this can be inculcated through doctrine. Extant doctrine reflects the traditional view of U.S. dominance, and so will need to change to include operations for more limited objectives. Current strategic direction already requires this, but this direction is not reflected in doctrine. Doctrine needs to change to reflect more fully the range of military operations the United States is likely to need to conduct in the future, and more particularly to consider strategies of denial. A denial strategy could be a suitable means of meeting an anti-access/area-denial challenge. The main obstacle to making the required changes will be overcoming strategic culture and bureaucratic resistance.

Introduction

Background

The idea for this paper came as a result of a wargame in which the author participated in early 2015. The scenario involved the United States facing a near-peer adversary, 20 years into the future. At the end of the wargame, the general officers leading the U.S. teams described their strategies. Despite the American forces being at a disadvantage in several areas, such as fighting at range and weaknesses in particular capability areas, the operational concepts did not appear to consider limited aims or the prospect of the United States not prevailing in all areas. The briefings were peppered with doctrinal phrases such as “seize the initiative”, “dominate the battlespace” and descriptions of executing a “punishment” strategy. The author was struck that the generals did not seem able to envisage a situation in which America did not have clear superiority, or would be forced to pursue limited aims. Indeed, they did not even have the doctrinal lexicon to describe it. The wargame had intended to test the physical and technical capabilities of the United States in a conflict with a capable opponent; instead, it had inadvertently revealed a weakness in the way military leaders think about conflict. This paper examines the nature of that weakness and how it could be overcome.

Central Concepts

J.F.C. Fuller observed that: “many armies have been destroyed by internal discord, and some have been destroyed by the weapons of their antagonists, but the majority have perished through adhering to dogmas springing from their past successes – that is, self-destruction through inertia of mind.”¹ There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the mindset of military leaders can be the deciding factor in a conflict, and British Defence Doctrine considers that the conceptual

1. J. F. C. Fuller, *The Foundations of the Science of War*, 254; quoted in Paul Latawski, *The Inherent Tensions in Military Doctrine*. Sandhurst Occasional Papers No.5. United Kingdom: Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, 2011.

element of fighting power, embodied in doctrine and education, is just as important as the physical capabilities of a military force.² This paper argues that the cognitive element of U.S. military power is undermined by a deep-seated assumption of military dominance which is in reality unlikely to be durable. Unipolarity is unlikely to endure in the long term. Revisionist states such as Russia and China are challenging the global order.³ America's technical lead is eroding and the Department of Defense faces continued financial pressure. A move from a unipolar to a multipolar world changes the strategic utility of military force. Even while primacy endures, the chance of war with another great power is growing.⁴ Such conflicts may also need to be fought for limited objectives rather than for overwhelming victories, particularly when dealing with nuclear-armed states. Currently, US forces are psychologically unprepared to do so. This is partly due to U.S. strategic culture and partly a legacy of the conflicts that the United States has participated in since the end of the Cold War, which have been fought against much weaker foes. The current mindset can be addressed, at least partly, by revising military doctrine.

This paper makes a case for adapting existing doctrine to reflect that overwhelming victory may not always be the aim of military operations. In particular, it argues for the development of a doctrine of denial, which prevents an enemy from achieving its objectives without necessarily defeating the enemy in detail. The emphasis is not on physical capabilities, but on adapting the cognitive approach to conflict held by military officers and policymakers through a change in doctrine.

To support the argument, the paper starts by examining the American attitude to conflict that has developed as a result of a long period of primacy. It outlines how unipolarity is likely to

2. United Kingdom Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01 (JDP 0-01) *UK Defence Doctrine* (fifth Edition, November 2014), 25.

3. Department of Defense (DoD), *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America 2015 – The United States Military's Contribution to National Security* (June 2015), 2.

4. DoD, *National Military Strategy*, 4.

give way to multipolarity, or how conflicts with challenging adversaries could occur in an enduring unipolar world. Both of these situations could make pursuit of a clear victory either unattainable or unacceptably risky. The role of doctrine is examined, and the shortcomings of current doctrine are discussed. A case is made for the development of a doctrine of denial, both in general terms and specifically in order to meet anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) challenges posed by China in the Western Pacific. Finally, the paper discusses how a new doctrine could act as a change agent, and what obstacles there are likely to be to its implementation.

Strategic Background

American Strategic Culture

The dominant strategic culture among American policymakers and military officers is based on the conviction that U.S. military might is without peer, and that if force is used, it should be employed to inflict a complete and overwhelming defeat on the enemy. In his 1973 book, historian Russell Weigley used the phrase “The American Way of War” to describe the U.S. attitude to conflict. He traces American doctrines from the Revolutionary War through to the Cold War, taking in strategies of annihilation during the Civil War, Mahanian sea power, the advent of air power, the Second World War and the atomic age. His central argument is that since the Civil War, there has been a prevailing belief among American policymakers and military officers that “the complete overthrow of the enemy, the destruction of his military power, is the object of war.”⁵ More recent analyses have not uncovered any significant change. Max Boot posits a “New American Way of War” in a 2003 article. He considers that a Revolution in Military Affairs enables the USA to defeat enemies quickly, cleanly and cheaply

5. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1977), xxi.

with precision effects using stand-off systems.⁶ However, although this could be considered to represent a change from the strategies of attrition and annihilation described by Weigley, the effect on the enemy is effectively the same: overwhelming defeat, albeit through confusion and shock as well as physical destruction. Thomas Mahnken refines Boot's observations and contends that despite a flirtation with using limited strikes to coerce adversaries, American military operations since the attacks of September 11, 2001 have demonstrated a return to the traditional preference for use of massive force.⁷

Debates over strategy in recent conflicts reveal that General Douglas MacArthur's famous maxim that in war "there is no substitute for victory"⁸ still pervades the mindset of American policymakers. During President Obama's deliberations over his strategy in Afghanistan, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates famously pushed for the defeat, rather than disruption, of the Taliban,⁹ and National Security Adviser General (ret'd) James L. Jones, wondered: "... don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Was the U.S. military aware of what good enough meant?"¹⁰ It can also be argued that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was driven, at least in part, by this powerful desire for clear and overwhelming victory. The 1991 Gulf War had achieved its political and military objectives by liberating Kuwait and severely degrading Iraq's status as a regional power. However, without a "Battleship *Missouri* surrender", a sense of 'unfinished business' because Saddam Hussein was still in power was a palpable contributor to the decision to invade Iraq in 2003.¹¹

6. Max Boot, "The New American Way of War," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no.4 (July/August 2003), 42-44.

7. Thomas G. Mahnken, *Technology and the American Way of War* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2008), 195.

8. Quoted in Colonel Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counter-Insurgency* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2013), 117.

9. Bob Woodward, *Obama's Wars* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 145.

10. Ibid, 161.

11. Joshua Rovner "Delusion of Defeat: The United States and Iraq, 1990-1998," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, No.37 Vol.4 (2014), 484.

While U.S. strategists and military officers continue to expect quick and overwhelming victories, it is becoming increasingly likely that this way of thinking will not be appropriate to future conflict. The American military edge is eroding, both in relative terms as rival powers develop their capabilities, and in absolute terms as U.S. forces become less prepared to conduct major combat operations.

Challenges to U.S. Primacy

The US has enjoyed increasing military dominance since the end of the Second World War, and emerged as the world's sole superpower with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although there is some debate about whether the United States truly qualifies as a global hegemon, it is undoubtedly the most powerful nation in the world and arguably the only regional hegemon.¹² Leaving aside the technical definitions of hegemony, scholars generally agree that the United States is at the top of a unipolar system.¹³ It has been argued that the emergence of another comparable power with similar economic strength is the only real prospect of a serious security threat to the United States.¹⁴

However, structural realism predicts that hegemonic powers are likely to fail, either due to counterbalancing by other powers, by overextension, or a combination of the two.¹⁵ There is evidence that the United States is subject to both pressures. The relative gap between the United States and regional powers such as China, and India is forecast to narrow steadily, both in economic terms and in military capability.¹⁶ The National Intelligence Council assesses it

12. John J. Mearscheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 41.

13. Nuno P. Monteiro, "Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity is Not Peaceful," *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Winter 2011/12), 9.

14. Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 4.

15. Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 21.

16. Ministry of Defence, United Kingdom, *Global Strategic Trends*, July 2014, xvii-xx.

inevitable that the United States' power will continue to decline relative to rising states, and considers that the "unipolar moment" is over.¹⁷ Russia, Iran, North Korea and China all appear to be actively challenging the current international order.¹⁸ In military terms, the most immediate risk is an erosion of America's technical superiority. Russia and China are both modernizing their armed forces in ways that are directly aimed at undermining American military dominance; Iran is pursuing a spectrum of advanced military capabilities and both Iran and North Korea are on the path to becoming nuclear powers.¹⁹ China in particular has been modernizing its forces with capabilities for sea control and power projection that present a formidable threat within its own region.²⁰ Priority appears to be going to anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities that deter U.S. intervention in the Western Pacific.²¹ All of these changes point to America losing the primacy it has enjoyed in the international system thus far.

Implications of a loss of Primacy

If unipolarity gives way to multipolarity, inter-state conflict will become more likely, and America will struggle to continue to play the role of the world's policeman.²² China poses a particular threat in this case. Barry Posen considers that "maintaining a wide margin of military superiority will be more demanding . . . as China and others grow economically, and if they behave as other rising powers have and allocate some of their new wealth to military

17. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, December 2012, x.

18. DoD, *National Military Strategy*, 2.

19. Eldridge Colby, "America Must Prepare for Limited War," *The National Interest* (November-December 2015), 1. <http://nationalinterest.org/print/feature/america-must-prepare-limited-war-14104>, accessed 6 November 2015.

20. Commander Victor L Vescovo, "Deterring the Dragon . . . From Under the Sea". U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, Vol.140 (February 2014). <http://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2014-02/deterring-dragon-under-sea>, accessed 13 January 2016.

21. Andrew S. Erickson, "Deterrence by Denial: How to Prevent China From Using Force." *The National Interest* (December 16, 2013). <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/war-china-two-can-play-the-area-denial-game-9564?page=show>, accessed 20 Jan 2016.

22. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2030: Alternative Worlds*, December 2012, vii.

capabilities.”²³ Although it may be some time before China is a true peer competitor to the United States, there is a real and growing risk that the two countries could find themselves in a rapidly escalating conflict in the near term.²⁴ Direct military confrontation with China is likely to be counterproductive.²⁵ Furthermore, any such conflict involves significant risk of rapid escalation, a frightening prospect given that China’s nuclear decision-making process is opaque to the United States.²⁶ Any conflict therefore needs to be limited if catastrophe is to be avoided.

As well as an increased chance of direct confrontations, there are subtler implications of a loss of primacy. If the United States finds itself in the position that it no longer has the physical overmatch required to overwhelmingly defeat any foe, application what is known as the ‘Weinberger-Powell’ doctrine becomes a burden. This doctrine states, *inter alia*, that the United States should only go to war for vital national interests, and if it does commit to conflict, to apply overwhelming force. The logical consequence is that the less likely it is that America can achieve dominance, the less likely it will be to go to war. This leaves the United States vulnerable to a ‘salami-slicing’ strategy, where opponents infringe gradually and incrementally on small interests, never triggering the threshold for a robust U.S. response.²⁷ Hardly any American interests could be considered important enough to fight an unrestrained war over, risking escalation when facing nuclear armed adversaries like Russia or China.²⁸ In this case, America will need to curtail its ambitions and decide what is worth fighting for; again, objectives and scale of conflict will need to be limited.

23. Posen, *Restraint*, 14.

24. Avery Goldstein, “China’s Real and Present Danger: Now is the Time for Washington to Worry,” *Foreign Affairs*, (Jul/Aug 2014), 1.

25. William Johnston, “Why a forceful U.S. response to China’s artificial island-building won’t float.” *The Great Debate* (blog), 21 May 2015. <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/05/21/why-a-forceful-u-s-response-to-chinas-artificial-island-building-wont-float/>, accessed 1 Feb 2016.

26. Thomas X. Hammes, “Offshore Control: A Strategy for an Unlikely Conflict.” National Defense University Institute for National Strategic Studies *Strategic Forum* No.278 (June 2012), 4.

27. Colby, “America Must Prepare for Limited War,” 4.

28. *Ibid.*

It is clear, therefore, that America in a multipolar world will not be able to seek overwhelming victory in every conflict. However, it is not certain that the United States is likely to lose primacy in the short term, and by no means all analysts are convinced that unipolarity is moribund. Many expect unipolarity to last up to around 20 years from now. Although this does not seem like an immediate threat, those who will be generals at that time are attending Service academies now, so it is the right time to begin to plant the seeds of a culture change. Nevertheless, the issue is more pressing since there are compelling reasons to consider limiting the objectives of conflict even in a unipolar system.

Limited Conflict in a Unipolar World

So-called “unipolar optimists” believe that the United States will retain primacy for the foreseeable future. Since America’s power is so vast, other nations will not even attempt to compete with the United States, either on their own, or, in the absence of some unifying event, as a coalition.²⁹ However, this does not necessarily mean the absence of conflict. Nuno Monterio points out that the unipolar period has not been peaceful, but has been marked by more or less constant low levels of conflict; while these minor conflicts have not significantly threatened the United States, structural incentives still exist for rising powers to challenge U.S. power regionally.³⁰ Countries such as Russia and China appear to be practicing a form of ‘opaque balancing’ against the United States by developing capabilities that can offset American power without representing a direct challenge.³¹ Lt Gen H.R. McMaster asserts that the United States’ adversaries have become adept both at evading and emulating the United States’ most potent

29. Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 135.

30. Nuno P. Monteiro, “Unrest Assured: Why Unipolarity is Not Peaceful,” *International Security*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Winter 2011/12), 12.

31. Layne, *The Peace of Illusions*, 145.

capabilities.³² John Mearscheimer further argues that, to maintain its position as a regional hegemon, the United States will be bound to act as an offshore balancer globally to prevent the emergence of hegemons in other regions.³³ This necessarily entails conflict with more powerful states than the United States is currently used to fighting. American forces have found themselves in numerous conflicts since the end of the Cold War, but like many ‘wars of choice’ initiated by liberal regimes, these conflicts have been against much weaker enemies.³⁴ Thus the pursuit of overwhelming victory has not posed a challenge to the United States in recent history. The dominant experience of the American military since 1991 has been the rapid and total defeat of weak states and protracted operations against irregular enemies. This could change rapidly. The National Military Strategy assesses that “the probability of U.S. involvement in interstate war with a major power is . . . growing”³⁵, and Evan Braden Montgomery argues that the United States is not prepared for conflict with a major power such as China, having grown accustomed to weak opponents that do not possess the capability to seriously threaten U.S. capabilities.³⁶ As well as the physical capability to succeed in such a battle, U.S. forces will need the correct mindset to prevail. This can be instilled through appropriate doctrine.

32. Lt Gen H.R. Mc Master, “Continuity and Change: The Army Operating Concept and Clear Thinking About Future War,” *Military Review* (March-April 2015), 16.

33. Mearscheimer, *Great Power Politics*, 237.

34. Michael C. Desch, “America’s Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy,” *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2007/08), 16.

35. DoD, *National Military Strategy*, 4.

36. Evan Braden Montgomery, “Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific,” *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Spring 2014), 117.

The Role of Doctrine

Strategic Culture and Doctrine

Although military mindsets and doctrine are not synonymous, they influence each other through a complex relationship.³⁷ Doctrine informs decision-making and permeates the language and thinking of military officers.³⁸ As Clausewitz put it, “Doctrine is meant to educate the mind of the future commander.”³⁹ Its impact can be considerable. Stephen Biddle makes a powerful argument that doctrine and tactics are a greater factor in determining combat success than technology or mass.⁴⁰ Barry Posen points out that military doctrine may “. . . harm the security interests of the state if it fails to respond to changes in political circumstances, adversary capabilities, or available military technology . . . If war comes, such a doctrine may lead to defeat.”⁴¹ It is therefore vital that doctrine fully reflects reality if military officers are to be effective planners and commanders.

Sources of Doctrine

Doctrine is routinely generated and maintained by the military organizations that employ it.⁴² It is written using both top-down and bottom up processes. The top-down process codifies strategic direction, whereas a bottom-up approach captures experience gained by the forces in the field.⁴³ An example of top-down influence on doctrine would be nuclear strategy in the cold war,

37. Gary Sheffield, “Doctrine and Command in the British Army: An Historical Overview”, in Army Doctrine Publication *Operations* (November 2010), E-2.

38. Ibid, E-3.

39. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, first paperback edition, 1989), 141.

40. Stephen D. Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2006), 190.

41. Barry R. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 15-16.

42. Ibid, 42.

43. Harald Høiback, *Understanding Military Doctrine: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 172. Høiback also discussed ‘inside-out’ and ‘outside-in’ formulations to reflect doctrine generated either from the expertise of the writer or collating inputs from diverse sources.

which led to conventional forces in Europe adopting a positional defense doctrine over a maneuverist approach.⁴⁴ Bottom-up influences on doctrine reflect what the military is actually used for, and its organizational-culture self-image about what it should be and do. An example of such influence might be the development of counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine as a result of involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan. An emphasis on COIN and stability operations and the consequent flexibility required at the tactical level has arguably led much of modern doctrine to descend into platitudes about being smart and adaptable.⁴⁵ Patrick Porter suggests that the ‘war on terror’ has caused American military culture to move away from Clausewitzian concepts of war in favour of a mistaken emphasis on culture.⁴⁶ In turn, doctrine also shapes military thought about what the Services considers to be their core missions.⁴⁷

Shortcomings of Current Doctrine

Current U.S. Doctrine is rooted in the mindset of primacy and the quest for overwhelming victory. Figure 1 (below) is taken from U.S. joint doctrine and depicts the notional phasing for a military operation. Although the model is not meant to be rigidly prescriptive, it tells us a lot about how the U.S. Department of Defense expects its forces to be employed.

44. Sheffield, “Doctrine and Command,” E-18.

45. Høiback, *Understanding Military Doctrine*, 14.

46. Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 55.

47. Høiback, *Understanding Military Doctrine*, 116.

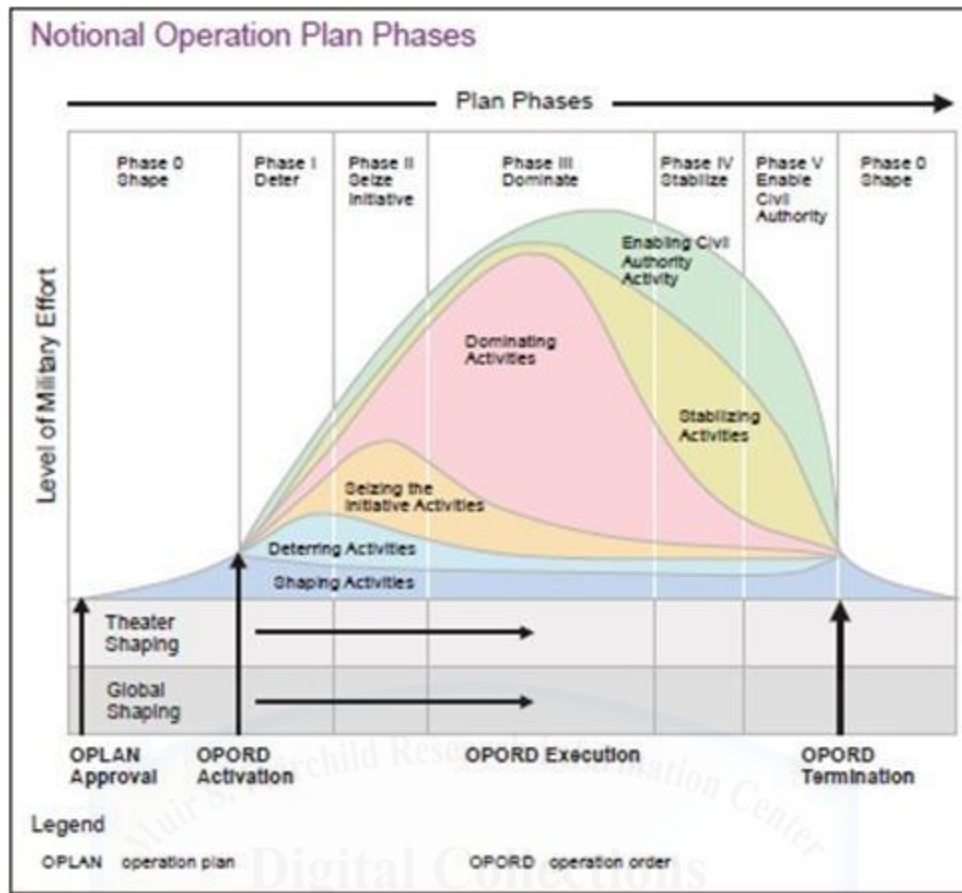


Figure 1: Notional Operation Plan Phases⁴⁸

The document provides further details on what is entailed in each phase: Phase I includes mobilization and deployment of forces; in Phase II, rapid offensive action forces the enemy to culminate, “creating conditions for the exploitation, pursuit, and ultimate destruction of both those forces and their will to fight during the *dominate* phase” (emphasis in original); enemy forces are defeated in Phase III; Phases IV and V stabilize and begin to rebuild a nation lacking effective governance.⁴⁹ This reveals how the employment of U.S. forces is envisaged: a force is deployed overseas, gains full control of the battlespace, decisively defeats an enemy and then rebuilds a shattered nation. Although presented as a generic model which can be adjusted to all joint operations, the six-phase construct is land-centric and inapplicable to many types of

48. DOD Joint Publication 5-00, *Joint Operations Planning*, 11 August 2011, III-39.

49. Ibid, III-41 to III-44.

military operations such as homeland defense, air policing, counter piracy, space control operations and cyber operations. The model is, however, highly consistent with U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, and therefore supports the “bottom-up” model of doctrine development. As the military historian Professor Gary Sheffield has pointed out, it is natural for military officers to think in terms of the conflicts they are accustomed to, in the absence of any other strategic direction.⁵⁰ While U.S. strategic direction since 2001 has paid progressively greater attention to violent extremism and less attention to possible conflict with peer competitors, it is not entirely valid to say that the shortcomings in doctrine are due to an absence of top-down direction. Careful examination of successive national security strategies and national military strategies will reveal not only the requirement to be able to defeat state actors,⁵¹ but also a need to conduct operations with more limited objectives. The 2015 National Military Strategy (NMS) articulates this most clearly: “If deterrence fails, at any given time, our military will be capable of defeating a regional adversary in a large-scale, multi-phased campaign while denying the objectives of — or imposing unacceptable costs on — another aggressor in a different region.”⁵² The key part of this phrase is not the reference to defeating an enemy, but denying the objectives of an aggressor. The provenance of this phrase can be traced back to the end of the Cold War, including the so-called ‘2 wars’, 10-30-30 and 1-4-2-1 strategies, all of which included a requirement to be able to fight two major conflicts, either simultaneously or in rapid succession. The rationale was to be able to prevent an opportunistic aggressor taking advantage of an American commitment to an operation in one part of the world to make gains where the United States was not committed. This logic endures in the current NMS, which points out that the

50. Sheffield, “Doctrine and Command,” E-3.

51. For example, the 2015 National Military Strategy states that “For the past decade, our military campaigns primarily have consisted of operations against violent extremist networks. But today, and into the foreseeable future, we must pay greater attention to challenges posed by state actors.”

52. DoD, *National Military Strategy*, 6.

United States does not have the luxury of confining itself to a single challenge.⁵³ Starting with the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance, the requirement for this second scenario was reduced from defeating an adversary to denying their objectives.⁵⁴ With reductions in available funding for defense, denial was seen as requiring fewer resources than defeat. However, denial remains a poorly defined term and, as a top-down strategic requirement, is not adequately reflected in U.S. doctrine. The NMS does not expand on what it means by denial, other to say that it requires “highly-ready forces forward, as well as well trained and equipped surge forces at home, resilient logistics and transportation infrastructures, networked intelligence, strong communications links, and interoperability with allies and partners.”⁵⁵ In fact, the terms ‘deny’ or ‘denial’ are only vaguely referred to in U.S. doctrine and are not even mentioned in the DOD directory of terms and definitions.⁵⁶

The current U.S. doctrine and military mindset are unsuitable for future conflicts involving limited objectives because they reflect the U.S. strategic culture of overwhelming force as well as a recent history of quick and often relatively bloodless victories against less-capable enemies and subsequent protracted stability operations. More specifically, current doctrine does not reflect the strategic direction to be prepared to pursue the limited aim of denying an adversary their objectives. As a result, U.S. military officers are unused to thinking in terms of denial rather than victory. The first step in addressing the issue will be to create a doctrine for denial operations.

53. DoD, *National Military Strategy*, 3.

54. DoD, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, January 2012, 4.

55. DoD, *National Military Strategy*, 7.

56. DoD, *Dictionary of Military Terms*, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/dod_dictionary/index.html, accessed 26 November 2015. JP 3-15 defines a ‘denial measure’ as “an action to hinder or deny the enemy the use of territory, personnel, or facilities”. USMC tactical doctrine has a similar definition for denial, but Army doctrine limits use of the term ‘deny’ merely to information operations (FM3-13).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Denial Strategies

Robert Pape defines a strategy of denial as one that targets “. . . the opponent’s military ability to achieve its territorial or other political objectives.”⁵⁷ However, the mechanism for achieving this is unclear. Barry Posen argues convincingly that a great strength of the United States is its ability to command the global commons of air, sea and space. The ability to deny the use of the commons to other nations allows many of America’s security and foreign policy objectives to be met.⁵⁸ Denial strategies are inherently less escalatory than direct conflict and provide time and options for diplomatic solutions.⁵⁹ In any case, a decisive victory in a conflict with a major power such as China may be unobtainable.⁶⁰ A strategy of denial has greater potential to bring about a positive outcome for two reasons. First, denial strategies act indirectly. Although this suggests that denial could lead to a protracted and indecisive campaign, it has been suggested that they may in fact bring greater pressure to bear than a low-intensity conflict, particularly if there is a significant economic impact.⁶¹ Second, conflict resolution may be aided if there is no clear military victor, as the adversary is able to withdraw without losing face.⁶² Success may come on the diplomatic line of operations rather than as a measurable military event, which will need to be emphasized in doctrine. An illustration of a real-world problem where denial could bring about a better outcome than all-out combat is in reaction to Chinese territorial expansion in the South China Sea.

57. Robert A. Pape, *Bombing to Win: Air Power and Coercion in War* (United States: Cornell University Press, 1996), 19.

58. Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 140-141.

59. Thomas X. Hammes, “Strategy and AirSea Battle.” *War On The Rocks* (blog), 23 July 2013. <http://warontherocks.com/2013/07/hammes-strategy-and-airseabattle/>, accessed 5 Feb 2016.

60. Hammes, “Offshore Control”, 14.

61. Ibid, 12.

62. Ibid, 6.

A2/AD – a case for denial

Possibly the clearest illustration of where a doctrine of denial could be effective is in countering the challenge posed by China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) capabilities. Currently the Department of Defense is drafting a doctrine to overcome A2/AD under the auspices of the Joint Operational Access Concept. Known as Air-Sea Battle,⁶³ this is intended to combine close coordination between Services with advanced capabilities to defeat adversaries employing A2/AD strategies.⁶⁴ Several analysts have made the case that instead of developing ever more exquisite and expensive capabilities to overcome A2/AD challenges, it would be cheaper and easier to employ a denial strategy.

Thomas X. Hammes criticizes Air-Sea Battle as simply a tactical concept that lacks a theory of victory that should not be used to structure the armed forces.⁶⁵ He proposes a strategy of Offshore Control – a distant blockade whose defining feature is the denial of battlespace to Chinese forces in their area of interest.⁶⁶ Such a strategy would be heavily reliant on mines, submarines, and long-range aircraft.⁶⁷ Instead of seeking a decisive military victory, Offshore Control seeks to avoid escalation and exhaust the enemy economically.⁶⁸ Andrew Erickson argues that, instead of attempting to counter Chinese A2/AD capabilities, it would be easier and cheaper to deter China by demonstrating the ability to deny it the ability to seize and hold disputed territories. Rather than attempting to gain access for U.S. forces, accepting a “no-man’s land” where neither side can operate effectively achieves the aim of preventing an aggressor

63. Now renamed Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons; since most published material refers to Air-Sea Battle, this paper will continue to use the previous term.

64. DoD, *Joint Operational Access Concept*, Version 1.0 (January 2012), 4.

65. Hammes, “Offshore Control”, 2-3.

66. Ibid, 4.

67. Ibid, 5.

68. Ibid, 6.

from gaining territory.⁶⁹ Again, this effect would be delivered by a combination of sea and air control technologies including mines, submarines, and air-to-air and air-to-surface missiles. A similar argument is made by Commander Victor Vescovo, who believes the United States should react to aggression by China by using submarines and sea mines to interdict all civilian and military shipping, combined with a legal effort to block trade.⁷⁰ Further, a RAND study completed for the Army in 2013 suggests that existing Air-Sea Battle doctrine be supplemented by a distant blockade enforced by land-based anti-ship missiles, reducing the effectiveness of A2/AD measures by denying battlespace to Chinese forces.⁷¹ Eric Lindsey, a research fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, took this work further to argue that the Army should embrace air and sea denial as a core competency.⁷²

Denial strategies have several clear advantages in this context. They are less reliant on forward basing, and those capabilities that are based in foreign countries are generally defensive in nature.⁷³ This offers the dual benefit of being more likely to secure permission from host nations, and complicating China's ability to strike against those countries for fear of widening the conflict.⁷⁴ Additionally, not being reliant on exquisite capabilities, a capability to execute a denial strategy can more easily be demonstrated in peacetime, increasing the effectiveness of conventional deterrence and providing opportunities to signal opponents in time of tension.⁷⁵ For the same reason, forces optimized for denial are likely to be significantly cheaper to generate and

69. Erickson, "Deterrence by Denial"

70. Vescovo, "Deterring the Dragon"

71. Terrance K Kelly, Anthony Adler, Todd Nichols and Lloyd Thrall. *Employing Land-Based Anti-Ship Missiles in the Western Pacific*. (RAND Arroyo Center, 2013), 19.

72. Eric Lindsay, *Beyond Coast Artillery: Cross-Domain Denial for the Army*. Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (October 2014), 8.

73. Hammes, "Offshore Control", 5.

74. Ibid, 7.

75. Ibid, 9-10.

maintain than those focused on domain control.⁷⁶ A change to doctrine to support a denial strategy could bring benefits in terms of operational success, deterrence, and savings on force structure.

Recommendations

In order to develop a broader mindset among military officers, U.S. military doctrine should develop the concept of conducting limited operations against peer or near-peer enemies, particularly strategies of denial. Exercises, wargames, experimentation and force development should include operations with limited objectives, both to ensure the force is structured correctly and to inculcate a mindset among leaders.

Changing Doctrine – Opportunities and Challenges

Changing existing doctrine can bring the kinds of benefits described above, but is likely to encounter bureaucratic resistance and bring some challenges in implementation. The recommendation of this paper is to change existing doctrine by moving away from the prescriptive six-phase generic operations model to encourage commanders and planners to think differently, and introduce a doctrine of denial as an option when designing operations.

A new doctrine will not, on its own, change strategy or how forces will fight, but it can change the structure and practices of a military organization, as well as the culture and mindset of its members.⁷⁷ However, military organizations are particularly parochial and resistant to change.⁷⁸ Changing a doctrine can have a disorienting effect on the military and will need time to take effect.⁷⁹ Doing this during wartime can be very dangerous.⁸⁰ Changes in doctrine are rarely

76 Hammes, "Strategy and AirSea Battle."

77. Høiback, *Understanding Military Doctrine*, 169.

78. Posen, *Military Doctrine*, 45.

79. Ibid, 30.

80. Sheffield, "Doctrine and Command," E-2.

initiated by the military itself.⁸¹ The military bureaucracy resists change unless compelled by threats or failure.⁸² An example of such change was the doctrinal debate and experimentation undertaken by the U.S. Army after withdrawing from Vietnam.⁸³ In the absence of such compelling factors, doctrine will not be an effective tool of procedural or cultural change, unless it has top-level support or even a ‘champion’ with an established reputation, as General Petraeus was for COIN doctrine in 2006.⁸⁴ There are also strong bureaucratic incentives for the military to prefer a doctrine of overwhelming victory, as such offensive doctrines support arguments for expansive military spending.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, given that the NMS directs the military to be able to ‘deny the objectives’ of an aggressor state, doctrine is incomplete without a comprehensive treatment of denial strategies. Such a change would open the way for more creative thinking about some of America’s most dangerous military challenges, even if it only starts by providing the language to talk about them.

Conclusion

The position of military primacy the United States has enjoyed for the past generation is eroding and it is possible that America may face conflict with a peer or near-peer competitor in the future. Even if unipolarity proves to be durable, U.S. forces could still need to fight a much more capable adversary than in recent conflicts in order to maintain America’s position of primacy. As well as the physical capabilities required to succeed in such a battle, U.S. forces will need the correct doctrine and mindset to prevail. The American way of war is to seek decisive and overwhelming victories, and current doctrine reflects this. However, in future conflicts against capable enemies, it may be necessary to fight for more limited objectives, particularly if

81. Posen, *Military Doctrine*, 54.

82. Høiback, *Understanding Military Doctrine*, 170.

83. Sheffield, “Doctrine and Command,” E-19.

84. Høiback, *Understanding Military Doctrine*, 172.

85. Posen, *Military Doctrine*, 49.

it is necessary to control escalation against a nuclear-armed state. Although current strategic direction requires the forces to be able to pursue a strategy of denial rather than outright victory, this is not reflected in doctrine and U.S. military officers are unused to thinking in such terms. This is inappropriate for many possible military operations, and particularly when considering how to meet an A2/AD challenge. Doctrine should be changed to include denial strategies and reduce the emphasis on seeking to dominate the enemy in all cases. This is likely to meet bureaucratic resistance from the Services, but has the potential to create a more effective force to face the likely challenges of the near and far future.

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Notes



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